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# The Postmodern Gospel

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WE ARE TOLD THAT we live in a postmodern age, but what exactly is meant by 'postmodern'? Our age is being termed postmodern quite simply because of a general rejection of modernity and the principles upon which it was founded. Modernity refers to the modern period of the 17th and 18th centuries which is often dubbed, 'The Enlightenment'. The cornerstone of the Enlightenment was the belief in a new and *enlightened* form of science. This new science was founded upon two modern beliefs. The one, advanced by Frances Bacon, was that science ought to be based on objective, empirical study rather than philosophical speculation. The other view, championed by Rene Descartes, was that our knowledge could be made precise and certain after the model of mathematics.

This second view required that the world be reduced to matter or a single kind of thing that could be quantified.

Ancients like Plato and Aristotle had believed that a precise and certain knowledge of the world, after the model of mathematics, was impossible. The reason it was impossible was that the world was made up of many different kinds of things. A mathematical understanding requires that things be of the same kind (five apples plus six oranges equal what?). The advent of the corpuscular philosophy, which would evolve into atomic chemistry, solved this problem by reducing everything to the same basic matter or atoms which could be quantified. Isaac Newton then took these two tenets of Bacon and Descartes and brilliantly combined them in such a way that his mathematical calculations were verified in observation, and his observations were quantifiable.

The belief that the world was orderly, which dated from at least the Greeks, took on a new form. The order of the universe was now in the form of universal and mathematically precise laws that could be detected with scientific reason. The early fruits of this new science were so impressive that

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progress quickly came to be seen as synonymous with the new science. In time it became the great metanarrative and model for all right thinking.

Of course, from the start, Enlightenment science was not without its opposition. The romantic poets of the 18th century, as well as philosophers such as Leibniz, Berkeley, and Hume, were among the first to take opposition to either its materialism or optimism. In the 19th century further opposition arose from philosophers as diverse as Hegel, Nietzsche, and William James, to mention just a few. With the 20th century the attack increased. New insights into the nature of language by the likes of Saussure and Wittgenstein undermined the idea that an objective view of the world was attainable. Foucault persuasively argued that our idea of truth was a social construct created by those in positions of power. Others from Thomas Kuhn to Derrida showed how perspectival and relative our understanding really was. With Einstein even the scientific community had to admit that we had no objective or privileged place from which to make our observations. The social sciences of anthropology and sociology brought even more light to the fact that our human understanding was enormously biased by our culture and history. What truly brought about the end of modernity and its claim to be the path to progress, however, was not so much the work of intellectuals but rather the history of the 20th century.

The vision of the Enlightenment was that three hundred years of scientific progress would bring us to utopia. However, quite to the contrary, the 20th century witnessed over 100 million people killed in wars, and 35,000

to 40,000 thousand children dying each day from the effects of hunger and malnutrition. By the end of the 20th century the very existence of the planet was being threatened, and science did not seem capable of doing anything about it. The Enlightenment's faith in scientific reason had failed to deliver what it had promised, and something else was obviously needed. But what is it that postmodernism promises as an alternative?

There seems to be a mistake in supposing that postmodernism offers an alternative to modernity. It certainly does not. At this point, we know that modernity has come to an end but, as of yet, we know little more than that. We can no more say what typifies this new, postmodern age than someone in 1650 could have defined modernity or Enlightenment. By 1650, Bacon and Descartes had already published, and the medieval world was passing away, but Isaac Newton was only eight years old, and it was far too early to say what modernity was to become. Likewise, the publications of Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard are not enough to establish the nature of a postmodern age.

What popular culture considers postmodernism is merely the fact that there is, at present, no metanarrative that we all embrace, in the way most of us embraced the myth of Enlightenment science for the last 300 years. Today, the only consensus is that the science of modernity is not capable of bringing us into the wonderful world it promised. We are thus left for the moment without any definite direction. That creates a great opportunity for the gospel.

Modernity's model of knowledge as empirical, objective, and precise was

certainly not conducive to the idea of knowing God through a personal faith relationship. With the demise of the myth that the scientific model was the model for all real knowledge, room has been made for the kind of knowledge of which the gospel speaks. With the debunking of the scientific idea that all knowledge must be objective knowledge, we can now speak of a God who is not an object but a subject – indeed, a person.

Furthermore, there is more good news concerning the end of modern science as the great metanarrative and the only way to truth, for with its destruction modern atheism lost much of its foundation. Atheism found support in the modern period from the Enlightenment myth that there were objective laws or principles to which we had access through scientific reason. If language is relative to culture and a language community, and our understanding is cast in language, there can be no metanarrative that objectively and universally explains the reality of our existence. That post-modern insight that the metanarrative was an Enlightenment notion whose time has passed eliminates the support modern atheism found in Darwin, Marx, and Freud.

Certainly biological species may change over time, and they often may change for the reasons Darwin gave, but it was the belief of modernity that such a principle was a universal and absolute law which governs all species. But why should species change or remain unchanged because of a single reason or principle? Why does there have to be one totalizing metanarrative? Why not multiple principles or explanations?

Likewise, Marx's idea of class analysis certainly provides a valuable insight, but to believe that this is the Rosetta stone or underlying principle behind all social interaction is to make it into a metanarrative. It is certainly a valuable insight, but not *the* insight to which all others are subordinate.

Freud too certainly contributed to our understanding of human behaviour by introducing us to the unconscious. However, to believe that the unconscious holds the key to all the secrets of human existence is again founded upon the modern belief that we had finally become enlightened and discovered the universal principle central to all understanding.

As these sources of modern atheism are undermined, Christianity, by contrast, remains intact. That is because Christianity is not a metanarrative in spite of all efforts to make it one. Christianity will always be a personal relationship with the risen Christ, and never an explanation of how things are for everyone everywhere. Of course, there are similarities between our personal relationships because we are in relationship with the same person, but those relationships differ as well due to the fact that we are all different people, with different conceptual understandings, and at different points in our relationship with God. God meets us where we are in our respective understandings, so we all begin in different places. Our initial understanding of God is always that of a tribal god who is largely a product of our own culture and understanding. Through humility and a genuine desire to know him, however, we can, in time, come to know the God who transcends all culture. This knowledge of God will never be the

kind of objective and precise knowledge that modernity sought. But although this God cannot be discovered through the methods of science, he is faithful to reveal himself to those who humbly seek him.

The lie of modernity was that truth and meaning were to be found only in that which could be known objectively and with the kind of narrow exactness that we find in mathematics. That was the great metanarrative of modernity to which everyone was forced to conform if they wished to be considered rational. Of course, such thinking did produce a technology that we may not want to be without, but it was not capable of leading us to the kind of truth and meaning that lies at the base of the Christian life. It certainly was not an appropriate model for intimately knowing persons, either human or divine.

Modernity taught us to seek a truth that was objective, certain, and precise, but the gospel sets before us a God who is a subject and not an object, and like any subject or person can never be known by the method of knowing that modernity insisted upon. Modernity told us that we should rid ourselves of all bias in order to discover an objective truth untainted by our prejudice. The gospel, however, tells us that we are to bring the prejudice of faith to every circumstance.

Modernity provided us with a method that gave us a confidence in our certain and precise understanding, but the gospel leads us to an understanding founded upon a divine beauty that we behold in humble awe. The truth of modernity was something we could get a hold of, but the truth of the gospel is something that gets a hold of us.

Fortunately, we now know the method that modernity insisted upon is not the universal form of right reason it had claimed to be, but it merely represents one form of reason. This should be good news to Christians, since it means that we are no longer forced to accept a logic so antithetical to the gospel. We are now free to pursue forms of rationality more compatible with a gospel that is personal and mysteriously beautiful rather than objective and mathematically precise.

Thus, a postmodern gospel is not one in which all order, meaning, and truth is lost. Rather, all that is lost is the kind of order, meaning, and truth that modernity had insisted upon. The good news of the postmodern gospel is that, with the end of modernity, we now have an ever greater opportunity to order our lives, not based upon an understanding of some universal and objective truth, but rather upon an intimate understanding of a truth that is personal and subjective – indeed, a truth that is a person (John 14:6).